

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 032 600

CG 004 595

By-Bednar, Richard L.; Parker, Clyde A.  
Client Susceptibility to Persuasion and Counseling Outcome.  
American Psychological Association, Washington, D.C.  
Pub Date Aug 69

Note-21p.; Paper was presented at the American Psychological Association Convention, Washington, D.C.,  
August 31--September 4, 1969.

EDRS Price MF-\$0.25 HC-\$1.15

Descriptors-\*Behavior Change, \*Change Agents, \*Counseling, \*Counseling Effectiveness, Counseling Goals,  
\*Personal Growth, Research Design

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ED0 32600

# CLIENT SUSCEPTIBILITY TO PERSUASION AND COUNSELING OUTCOME

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## Summary

A randomized design with a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial arrangement of treatments was employed to investigate the role of susceptibility to persuasion, expectations for personal growth and divergent counseling treatments in the process of behavior change. The results of the investigation indicated that:

- (1) the divergent counseling treatment procedures were equally successful in effecting change of equivalent magnitude, but in divergent directions;
- (2) there were no differences in client satisfaction between the two counseling treatments in spite of the opposite directions of change;
- (3) susceptibility to persuasion and heightened expectations did not significantly influence the magnitude of change; and
- (4) the high persuasibility subjects perceived the counseling treatments as more valuable to themselves and others and expressed greater interest in continuing treatment as well as attempting new behaviors.

## Introduction

Recent theoretical developments (Frank, 1963) suggest that any form of behavior intervention may be successful if

the client has sufficient belief in the efficacy of the treatment he is receiving. Consistent with this view is the possibility that all the divergent systems of behavior interventions are accurately reporting successful counseling cases, but not as a result of the intrinsic validity of the respective systems as each now suppose, but because of the actual irrelevancy of treatment parameters such as therapeutic techniques, content, and theoretical constructs. So long as each behavior system successfully imparts to the client the expectation he should improve as a result of the expert treatment he is receiving, and the client can be persuaded to believe in this system, a nonspecific "placebo" reaction may result in actual client improvement.

Several lines of empirical research help substantiate these theoretical assertions. It has been demonstrated that placebo administrations are as effective as short term psychotherapy in reducing neurotic symptoms and client personal discomfort (Frank, Gliedman, Imber, Stone, and Nash, 1959; Gliedman, Nash, Imber, Stone, Frank, 1958). There is also evidence indicating that placebo reactivity is a good prognostic indicator of a patient's ability to profit from psychotherapy and other methods of treatment offered in psychiatric hospitals (Hankoff, Freeman, Englehard, 1958). Client improvement has also been related to nonspecific treatment factors designed to impart a belief to a client that he was receiving psychological treatment when in fact he was being administered a "psychological placebo" (Goldstein, 1960). Counselor

expectations for client improvement have also been related to positive client outcomes (Goldstein, 1960, 1961).

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the role of susceptibility to persuasion, expectations for personal growth and divergent treatment methods in the process of behavior change. This will be accomplished by an experimental evaluation of client responses to divergent counseling treatments under different levels of susceptibility to persuasion and expectations for improvement.

The major thesis of the persuasion-placebo effect hypothesis is that counseling effectiveness is a result of the client's belief in the system being used to help him deal with his problems. It follows then that different counseling methods should be equally effective in producing changes in similar clients. It also follows that high persuasibility and expectations for improvement should add to the effectiveness of the counseling treatments.

### Methodology

The study employed a randomized design with a 2 x 2 x 2 factorial arrangement of treatments. The complete specification of these factors requires a description of the psychometric assessment of persuasibility, heightening client expectations for personal growth, and a description of the behavior interventions.

#### Assessment of Persuasibility

The persuasibility test developed by Janis and Field (1956)

was administered to a group of 250 students in an introductory psychology course. The experimenter was introduced as a representative from an independent research agency doing survey research. The subjects did not know they were being screened for susceptibility to persuasion for a future experiment.

Considerable care was exercised in selecting subjects representing high and low persuasibility subjects. Inclusion in the study required a subject to earn a score at least one stigma above or below the mean. This was regarded as a stringent criterion considering the increased size of a standard deviation in this bi-modal distribution.

This procedure resulted in an initial pool of 80 potential subjects. These subjects were sent preliminary letters explaining the research and asking for their cooperation. The letter was specifically designed to arouse their interest. Also, students were offered six extra credit points toward their final grade if they participated. A total of 55 students responded. Thirty-two subjects were randomly selected from this group resulting in the experimental subject pool of 16 high persuasibility and 16 low persuasibility subjects.

Two steps were involved in heightening expectations for personal growth as a result of the counseling treatments. The first was the introduction of a high prestige figure to explain and answer questions about the research project. The second was the delivery of a prearranged cognitive input designed to arouse the subject's belief in the validity of the treatments they were going to receive. This was accomplished by focusing the pre-



sentation on personal advantages, such as improved interpersonal relationships, more adequate self-understanding, or improved personal adjustment, that could accompany exposure to the counseling treatment program. The procedures were replicated for the normal expectation subjects with the exception that a research assistant dressed in casual clothing explained the purpose of the research project and the prearranged cognitive input designed to heighten expectation was deleted.

### Counseling Treatments

Two behavior interventions were used in this study representing polar systems of thought regarding human emotions and feelings. The first approach, popularly known as Rational Emotive Psychotherapy, focuses on developing thinking patterns designed to rationally control emotions and feelings. In this system, emotions are regarded as something to be understood and controlled if they are to be kept from interfering with daily living. There is a strong emphasis on demonstrating the irrationality of many human feelings and how these feelings can be overcome through clear rational thinking.

The other approach most closely approximates the theoretical position of the Self-Theorists. This approach is different from the first in that it works toward open acceptance and expression of feelings. In this system, feelings are regarded as appropriate guides for good interpersonal behavior if a person becomes sufficiently sensitive to his own feelings as well as the feelings of others. Thus, rather

than striving for any form of rational control over feelings, this system has as its goals an open and honest responsiveness to feelings.

Both of these counseling approaches have recently been developed into programmed counseling units (Steiper and Ells, 1967; Human Development Institute, 1964). These programmed counseling units were used as treatment variables in this study.

#### Outcome Variables

Three classes of criterion variables were used. Each of these variables was directly related to either the attitudinal or content acquisition objectives of the behavior interventions employed. The first measured attitude and value changes. Specifically, changes in client orientation towards the desirability of expression or control of feelings was measured with the Semantic Differential. Six different semantic differentials were used each with different concepts from the bipolar constructs of the two treatment systems. The second set of variables measured the content acquisition of the counseling treatments. The last set of outcome variables measured client satisfaction. These included client self reports regarding: (a) new behaviors attempted, (b) degree of satisfaction and growth, (c) additional time the subject would like to be exposed to similar counseling treatments, and (d) the value the client placed on the treatments for other people.

## Results

### Counseling Treatments

There were three hypotheses tested that were specifically related to the counseling treatments. Consistent with the rationale of the persuasion placebo effect hypotheses, these hypotheses assert that opposing counseling treatments should be equally successful in changing behavior in directions consistent with its major goals, impart different concepts for understanding emotions, and produce equivalent satisfaction in the subjects.

#### Hypothesis 1: Equally Effective Counseling Treatment Programs

To determine if both of the counseling treatment programs were equally effective in producing behavior change of equivalent magnitude, but in opposite directions, the pre-post scores from the six different semantic differential rating scales representing the bipolar constructs of the two treatment programs were used as criterion variables in analysis of variance procedures. The statistical model was three between subject factors and one within subject factor in which the within factor represented the pre-post scores on the rating scales.

Table 1 summarized the analysis of variance for the six semantic differential criterion variables. Inspection of Table 1 reveals that four of the six criterion variables were sensitive to change in predicted directions at highly significant levels. These data were regarded as giving substantial support to the hypothesis that both counseling treatment programs would be equally effective in producing change of



equivalent magnitude but in opposite directions.

(Insert Table 1 About Here)

Hypothesis 2: Different Conceptual Systems for Understanding Emotions

To determine if the two counseling treatment programs did impart different concepts for understanding emotions and feelings, scores from the objective examinations measuring the information learned from each of the treatment programs was used as a criterion variable in a three-way classification analysis of variance, fixed model. Table 2 summarizes the analysis of variance. Both of these criterion variables yielded highly significant results in directions consistent with the notion that the two treatment programs did impart different concepts for understanding emotions and feelings.

(Insert Table 2 About Here)

Hypothesis 3: Equivalent Client Satisfaction

To determine if there were differences in the way in which subjects perceived and evaluated the experiences that accompanied exposure to the counseling treatment programs, the subject's self-ratings on four client satisfaction measures were used as criterion variables in a three-way classification analysis of variance, fixed model.

Table 3 summarizes the results of this analysis. Inspection of Table 3 reveals no significant differences. Accordingly, there is no basis for inferring either of the two treatments are perceived by clients as more desirable or effective.

(Insert Table 3 About Here)

### Persuasibility and Expectations

There were six basic hypotheses tested that were specifically related to the role of persuasibility and heightened expectations and their influence on the effectiveness of the two counseling treatment programs. Essentially, each of these different hypotheses asserts that both of these variables would have a significant positive influence on the various criterion variables being used to measure treatment potency.

#### Hypothesis 4: Persuasibility, Expectations and Change in Attitude and Values

To determine the effect of persuasibility or expectation for personal growth on attitude and value change, the after scores from the semantic differential ratings were used as criterion variables in analysis of covariance procedures. This procedure was completed for the subjects in the Rational Emotive and Self-Theory treatment groups separately.

Table 4 summarizes the analysis of covariance findings for both treatment groups. Inspection of Table 4 reveals no significant differences between the high-low persuasibility or expectation subjects in either of the counseling treatment programs. Accordingly, there is no evidence to support the hypothesis that persuasibility or heightened expectation for personal growth alone increases the effectiveness of the counseling treatments.

(Insert Table 4 About Here)

### Hypothesis 5: Persuasibility, Expectations and Content Acquisition

To determine the effect of persuasibility and heightened expectation on content acquisition, the scores from the objective examinations were used as criterion variables in a three-way classification analysis of variance, fixed models.

The analysis revealed no significant differences. Accordingly, there is no evidence to support the hypothesis that persuasibility or heightened expectations for personal growth increased the content acquisition scores based on the treatment programs.

### Hypothesis 6: Persuasibility, Expectations and Client Satisfaction

To determine the effect of persuasibility or expectations for personal growth on client satisfaction, the client's self-ratings were analyzed by a three-way classification analysis of variance, fixed model. The analysis of this data yielded no evidence to support the hypothesis that heightened client expectation for personal growth significantly influenced the degree of satisfaction reported by the subjects.

There were consistent findings, however, on all four client satisfaction criterion variables indicating that the high persuasibility subjects regarded the counseling treatment programs as more valuable to themselves and others as well as being more willing to continue their participation in the treatment programs and attempt new behavioral methods in dealing with their emotions and feelings. Table 5 summarizes these significance tests.

### Discussion

The following are the minimum findings which would have to be substantiated for the results of the current study to be regarded as logically consistent with the persuasion-placebo effect hypothesis developed earlier:

1. The two counseling treatment programs would both have to be successful in changing client responses in directions consistent with their respective goals.
2. The two counseling treatment programs would have to impart different concepts for understanding emotions and feelings.
3. The high persuasibility and high expectation subjects would both have to show greater gains in directions consistent with the goals of their respective counseling treatment programs than the low persuasibility and normal expectation subjects.
4. There should be a differential response in client satisfaction reported. There should be no difference in client satisfaction between the two counseling treatment programs, but within each of the counseling treatment programs the high persuasibility and expectation subjects should be reporting higher degrees of satisfaction.

It should be pointed out that construct validation requires supporting evidence for each of these assertions if the findings of this study are to be regarded as logically consistent with the theoretical basis that generated this study. If the findings fall short of this goal, even though empirically significant

and logically interesting, they should be viewed in terms of necessary theoretical revisions rather than partial theoretical support.

It will be recalled that there was substantial and consistent evidence demonstrating that both of the counseling treatment programs were successful in changing client value responses in directions consistent with their respective goals independent of "client needs." Also, there was equally strong and convincing evidence indicating there was a differential response in client satisfaction in which there was no difference between the two treatment programs, but differences within each treatment in which the high persuasibility subjects reported higher degrees of self-satisfaction.

There was no evidence, however, to support the assertion that persuasibility or expectations alone significantly influenced the client's response to the counseling treatments. This particular factor must be regarded as one of the core predictions generated from the theoretical basis of this study. Neither was there any supporting evidence for the assertion that client expectations influenced the way in which the experimental subjects perceived and evaluated the experiences that accompanied exposure to the counseling treatment programs.

The most important factor that needs to be accounted for is why the persuasibility and expectation factors failed to show any consistent effect on client behavior changes. This finding not only fails to support a major hypothesis in this study, but also contradicts many earlier studies in which



expectancy states or placebo re-activity was consistently associated with desirable therapeutic outcomes.

Two explanations seem plausible to account for the incomplete findings. First, the hypotheses of interest have been given an adequate test and on the basis of the current data must be rejected. The alternate explanation is that the construct of persuasibility investigated is the source of error.

The investigators favor revision and further experimentation with the concept of persuasibility. It appears that persuasibility as defined in this study does include a strong evaluative component, but does not influence the magnitude of attitude change. This raises an interesting question. Perhaps the high persuasibility subject's overevaluation of the benefits of the counseling treatments is the initial stage of a non-specific placebo effect which gives the client additional courage to deal with his problems. In brief, he believes he is being helped. Whether this belief is sufficient to produce continued positive changes over a period of time is an empirical question for future study.

The fact that both counseling treatment programs were equally successful in changing behavior in opposite directions is an interesting fact. It seems subject to explanation in two ways. First, the subjects had poorly defined attitudes and feelings regarding their beliefs about emotions and feelings. The poorly defined nature of these attitudes may have made the subjects highly amenable to change with exposure to systematic

programs designed specifically to give direction to responses.

The alternative explanation rests on the technical basis on which the programmed counseling treatment programs were designed. Both required a commitment from the subjects, both used reinforcement principles, and both gave the subjects an opportunity to learn more about emotions and feelings. The corresponding attitude changes may be the result of changes that are typically associated with the systematic use of reinforcement learning.

Table 1  
MEAN CHANGES AND SIGNIFICANCE TESTS FOR  
PRE-POST SEMANTIC DIFFERENTIAL RATINGS

Criterion Variables	Rational	Emotive	Self-Theorist	
	Change	F	Change	F
Control vs. Expression	+1.10	19.43**	- .64	6.89**
Thinking vs. Feelings	+ .77	13.47**	-1.03	25.14**
Needing Approval vs. Offering Approval	+ .11	1.02	- .08	.64
Expression vs. Control	- .91	13.49**	+ .78	9.60**
Feelings vs. Thinking	- .98	12.46**	+ .77	6.87**
Offering Approval vs. Needing Approval	- .09	1.42	+ .15	1.83

\* p .05

\*\* p .01

Note - The semantic differential ratings were based on the following concepts:

- (1) RATIONAL UNDERSTANDING OF FEELINGS is more important than open emotional expression;
- (2) OPEN EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS is more important than rational understanding of feelings;
- (3) Sensitivity to CLEAR THINKING is more important than sensitivity to personal feelings;
- (4) Sensitivity to PERSONAL FEELINGS is more important than sensitivity to clear thinking;
- (5) NEEDING approval and acceptance of others; and,
- (6) OFFERING approval and acceptance to others.

Table 2  
MEAN CONTENT ACQUISITION SCORES OF THE CONCEPTS  
BASED ON THE RATIONAL, EMOTIVE, AND  
SELF-THEORY TREATMENT PROGRAM

Criterion Variables	Source of Concepts		F
	Self-Theory	Rational Emotive	
Content Acquisition Scores:			
Rational Emotive Subjects	1.18	7.06	254.88**
Content Acquisition Scores:			
Self-Theory Subjects	6.62	3.68	86.06**

\* p .05

\*\* p .01

Table 3  
Summary of Four Criterion Variables Measuring Client Satisfaction  
for the Rational Emotive and Self-Theorist Treatment Programs

Criterion Variable	Method of Analysis	Source of Variation	F
Perceived Self Help	3-Way ANOVA	Rational Emotive vs. Self-Theorist	.07
Attempted New Behavior	3-Way ANOVA	Rational Emotive vs. Self-Theorist	.29
Motivation to Continue Treatment	3-Way ANOVA	Rational Emotive vs. Self-Theorist	.11
Perceived Value of Treatment for Others	3-Way ANOVA	Rational Emotive vs. Self-Theorist	2.00



Table 4  
Summary of the Analysis of Co-variance Findings for Persuasibility and  
Heightened Expectations for the Rational Emotive and Self-Theory  
Treatment Program on Six Criterion Variables

F Ratios for Six Criterion Variables									
Source Of Variation	df	Controlled vs. Expressed	Thinking vs. Feelings	Needing vs. Offering	Expressed vs. Controlled	Feelings vs. Thinking	Offering vs. Needing		
Self-Theorist									
A - Pers	1	.04	.10	.06	.43	.01	2.81		
B - Expect	1	.00	2.18	.80	.09	.01	3.61		
AB	1	1.18	.41	.30	.20	.01	3.45		
Adjusted Error	11								
Rational Emotive									
A - Pers	1	.22	.23	.01	.17	.35	.02		
B - Expect	1	.86	2.84	.01	1.09	.02	.23		
AB	1	.62	.53	2.35	1.63	.01	.81		
Adjusted Error	11								

Table 5

MEAN DIFFERENCES AND SIGNIFICANCE TESTS BETWEEN THE HIGH AND LOW PERSUASIBILITY  
SUBJECTS ON FOUR DIFFERENT CLIENT SATISFACTION CRITERION VARIABLES

Criterion Variables	Persuasibility		Diff	F
	High	Low		
Perceived Self Help	5.68	4.75	.93	7.03**
Attempted New Behavior	5.87	5.37	.50	4.57*
Motivation to Continue Treatment	12.43 hrs.	9.43 hrs.	3.00 hrs.	3.97*
Perceived Value of Treatment for Others	6.37	5.25	1.12	18.00**

\* p .05

\*\* p .01

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